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ABSTRACT

Four teachers, two from a rural high school and two from an urban one, spent a year trying to get students to examine similarities and differences between the two schools. The exchange program involved students from Malcolm X Shabazz High School of Newark, New Jersey and a group from rural New Jersey's Hunterdon Central High. Small groups of students paid visits to each other's schools. The theme for the first year of the project was "equity." Students from both schools took part in small group discussions during the visits, then returned to the large group to share reactions. The students discovered that they shared attitudes about some subjects (single parent households, working women) and began to question stereotypes about each other. Such activities help students learn to trust, to work together to solve problems, and to develop critical thinking skills. At the conclusion of the program, plans were underway to continue and expand it. (SG)

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MULTICULTURALISM, STEREOTYPES, AND CRITICAL THINKING: Breaking Down Barriers Among Urban and Rural High School Students

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on
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Four teachers from two very different schools have spent the past year involved in an attempt to get students to take a closer look at - and to think about - the differences which separate them as well as the similarities which connect them. Working with about ten students from each of the schools, we have attempted to give them an opportunity to explore topics related to a typical high school curriculum, but in an atypical way. We hope that what we have learned can be useful to others looking for a way to bridge the gap which all too frequently appears to separate students from different environments and ethnic backgrounds.

Who are the teachers involved, and how did they come to work together?

Robert Davis and Princess Towe are teachers of Social Studies and English, respectively, at Malcolm X Shabazz High School, a public high school in Newark, New Jersey. Bob has been teaching United States History, World History, and Civics at Shabazz since 1972. Princess has been teaching English I, II, III, IV, and Speech and Drama there since 1976. Bob is currently Yearbook Advisor and Academic Decathlon coach; Princess is coach of the Speech and Debate Team and just finished a stint as Senior Class Advisor. Princess and Bob are also involved in teacher education at Montclair State College, having taught courses in critical thinking at the graduate level and worked with the undergraduate teacher education program as well.

William Gaudelli teaches Social Studies at Hunterdon Central Regional High School; Nancy Soderberg was an English teacher there for many years. Nancy left Hunterdon Central at the end of the 1991-1992 school year to move to Massachusetts. Bill remains there, where he will be starting his third year of teaching and will continue to be Hunterdon Central's Debate Coach.

The two schools are, as one might imagine, strikingly different in many ways, ranging from physical plant to student body.

Malcolm X Shabazz High School, which occupies a city block in Newark's South Ward, is a typical Newark school, and Newark's schools are typical of urban schools in the Northeast. Shabazz is one of nine high schools in Newark, and has a student population of about 1200. It is approximately 90% African American and 10% Latino. There are no white students at Shabazz. Newark itself has an African American population of 58.6% and a Latino population of 26.1%. Over half of the Latino population is Puerto Rican, and there are significant numbers of Dominicans and Haitians in the city.

As with many urban schools, Shabazz has a serious dropout problem, and students frequently arrive with skills deficiencies. Because of those deficiencies, basic skills instruction takes up much of their time. There are few electives offered, and few students take them.

Among the skills in which Shabazz students are weakest are those which involve critical thinking. All too often, they come to us the products of a 'learning' environment that has done little or nothing to prepare them for either the high school environment or the society in which they will be expected to function when they leave - either as dropouts or as graduates. Like many of their colleagues, teachers at Shabazz face the dual challenge of providing our students with the content the curriculum demands as well as the critical thinking skills life demands.

Hunterdon Central Regional High School, located in the town of Flemington, in New Jersey's rural Hunterdon County, presents quite a different picture. Central's educational complex is situated on several acres, and includes a media building with multiple computer terminals for student use and an extensive collection of books and periodicals, a field house, and a separate 'house' for the ninth

graders. The school's 1900 students can take advantage of a large variety of course offerings.

Until recently a mostly agricultural, rural community, Flemington has in the past several years become the home of many upper middle class families. Hunterdon Central includes students from these families as well as the still agricultural surrounding towns. While there can be a considerable gap between the incomes of the students, they are almost all white. The minority population of Hunterdon Central is about 1.6%. That's <u>all</u> minorities - African American, Latino...

That's not to say that there aren't similarities between our schools. We do, after all, both educate adolescents, who are members of a sub-culture that transcends certain boundaries. One of the goals of our collaboration has been to help our students to see those similarities, and we think that we have, at least in part, succeeded.

The Shabazz-Hunterdon Central Student Exchange Program had its start with some informal contacts during the 1990-1991 school year. As fellow Debate coaches, Princess Towe and Bill Gaudelli spent a few Saturday mornings together, and talked about the need for students to have an opportunity to learn more about each other. Bill took that idea back to his colleagues at Hunterdon Central, and together with Nancy Soderberg and the English and Social Studies Chairs, they contacted Princess at Shabazz. We discussed the idea, and were quite enthusiastic, as was our principal. We all recognized the need for students in our respective schools to learn more about each other - their similarities as well as their differences, and to begin to deal with real issues, to escape the stereotypical way that they looked at each other..

The Hunterdon Central group submitted a proposal to their Board of Education's Affirmative Action Committee. With its approval, a preliminary meeting took place at Shabazz, where we agreed that we should meet four times in the 1991-1992 school year, twice at each school.

Over the summer, the four teachers met to plan our first session, scheduled for Hunterdon Central in November. We chose a theme for the year - equity - and decided to choose activities that, at least at first, dealt with issues other than race. We agreed to limit the number of students from each school to ten or twelve, in order to assure as much opportunity as possible for individual students to participate in discussions. The general format for the day was to be for students to meet in a large group for a presentation or reading, then to break into small groups for discussion on the topic, returning to the large group for a debriefing activity.

Each team of teachers brought our plans back to our respective administrations. Mary Bennett, the Principal of Malcolm X Shabazz, presented it to Newark's Department of Secondary School Operations, and after receiving its approval made all the necessary arrangements for transportation and substitutes. At Hunterdon Central, they were equally cooperative. There is no doubt that both districts wanted the project to succeed.

At Hunterdon Central, interested students in Mr. Gaudelli's and Ms. Soderberg's classes were invited to submit essays explaining why they wanted to participate in the Student Exchange Program. A number of students responded, and ten were chosen from among them. The Hunterdon students were juniors and seniors.

At Shabazz, Mr. Davis and Ms. Towe chose students from their classes based on interest in the project. Grades and attendance

were considered, but were not central to the choices. Shabazz participants included freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors.

Visitations were scheduled for November and March to Hunterdon Central and January and May to Shabazz. The first visit, with students from Shabazz travelling to Central, was done deliberately. There had been some hesitation on the part of some Hunterdon Central parents and students about visiting an "inner city" school, and we felt that giving the students a chance to meet first would alleviate some of those fears. We were right. While there was still some nervousness about the trip to Shabazz in January, it was lessened. [Students will address this on the video at the end of our presentation.]

In keeping with the theme of "equity", the November session centered on the problems of a working mother of the thirties raising her daughter. It began with a reading called "I Stand Here Ironing," then small group discussion. The students were assigned to their small groups with concern only that at least two representatives of a school were in each group of five.

When students returned to the large group, they shared their reactions. What they discovered was that in their relationships with siblings and parents, and in such things as the problem of living in a single-parent household, they had remarkably similar experiences. In sharing two other readings, one about a nineteenth century woman worker in Germany and another about the role of women in Africa, they continued to explore the problems faced by women in society, and began to look at this issue, and others, more thoughtfully. Stereotypical attitudes - in both the urban and the rural students - began to be questioned.

In Critical Thinking, Richard Paul discusses the importance of developing dialectical thinking skills. He points out that "students learn that reflective self-criticism is possible and

beneficial by *doing* it. Students can begin by reasoning sympathetically within frames of reference that differ from their own." (page 300) In their discussions, while the frame of reference began by being different, students coming to the discussion from different points of view found that they had more in common than they thought. Thus, they became more aware of the validity of differing points of view on an issue. This, of course, was in line with one of our primary goals, that of allowing students to develop an insight into the problem of stereotyping and to begin to look at their own sociocentric or ethnocentric attitudes in a critical way.

Our second session, with Hunterdon Central visiting Shabazz, was held on January 16 - the day after Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. The significance of this wasn't lost on the students, who saw what they were doing as at least a step toward the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream. Dr. King's famous speech, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, was read in commemoration of the day. But once again, the theme of *equity* rather than *equality* was the focus of the day's discussion. Readings for the day dealt with the issues of bilingual education and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. What the students discovered in their small and large group discussions was that within this group, as in any group, there was a diversity of opinion. As they listened to each other, talked to each other, *argued* with each other, they saw again that the things which separated them and the things that brought them together were often the same.

At the beginning of the day, the student leaders at Shabazz joined the group. They were curious about the role of student government at Hunterdon Central, and the resulting discussion centered on the students' feelings toward school administration and rules. We don't have to tell you what they were.

Our third session, in March at Hunterdon, took a different direction. The Central group invited a new student organization, the Minority Student Union, to sit in, and the original format was soon discarded in favor of a roundtable discussion of the problems faced by minority students - and the fact that nearly anyone can be a minority in certain circumstances. The MSU students, who included several ethnic groups among them, talked about the difficulties they faced in organizing, and their surprise at the generally positive response their organization received among both students and faculty. The Shabazz students were surprised at the fact that letters both pro and con were allowed to be published in the school newspaper.

The day ended with an assembly during which the participants talked about their experience in the program, and members of the audience (about 250 students from social studies classes) responded. We'll be showing a videotape of that assembly shortly.

Our fourth session, at Shabazz, came in late May, just after the Los Angeles riots. Once again, the focus on equity led us to discuss the reactions of the Los Angeles community, and to look at the reasons behind that reaction - fear, distrust, lack of understanding of the culture and beliefs of others. The best part was that they could probably have met without the presence of any of the teachers, and the discussion would have been just as spirited, just as open. The twenty students had come a long way since their first meeting in November.

Last year, our session here in Sonoma dealt with the importance of informal as well as formal cross-disciplinary collaboration for critical thinking. What we are doing between Hunterdon Central High School and Malcolm X Shabazz High School is quite similar. In this case, the collaboration is interscholastic, adding a new dimension to the concept.

In Critical Thinking, Paul tells us, "The fundamental problems in schooling today at all levels are fragmentation and lower order learning. Both within and between subject areas there is a dearth of connection and depth. Atomized lists dominate curricula, atomized teaching dominates instruction, and atomized recall dominates learning. What is learned are superficial fragments, typically soon forgotten. What is missing is coherence, connection, and depth of understanding." (p. 229) (Emphasis ours.)

One important way we as educators can help supply that "coherence, connection and depth of understanding" is to demonstrate for students two things: that thinking goes on in your classroom, and in other classrooms as well AND that it can be carried from one classroom to another and from the classroom into other situations. Thinking doesn't occur in a vacuum, and it isn't confined to a specific place, or a specific topic, either.

John Barell, in Teaching for Thoughtfulness, reminds us of the importance of modeling and tells us that as teachers "...we are exemplifying attitudes and ways of perceiving that are important." (p. 78) He then goes on to discuss two modeling strategies - retrospective modeling and real time modeling. each of these involves the teacher and his/her class; in the former, analyzing how a problem was solved, in the latter analyzing it as it is solved. (p. 79) to these strategies, we have added a third, which we explored last year. That is, collaborative modeling. In collaborative modeling, the teachers show students the value and importance of working together to solve problems, or just to share ideas. This means that students have to see teachers working together, or just talking together, often, in a variety of settings. It has been our experience that students come to us with very little willingness to work collaboratively. Our society continues to send mixed signals to our young people, extolling the virtues of both "community" and the individual, and constantly teaching, by word and example, that mistrust of others is the norm.

While there is, unfortunately, some validity to that mistrust, urban, suburban, and rural high school students need to know that they can trust others, and that they can work together to solve problems. This first year of the Hunterdon Central - Shabazz Student Exchange Program has given our students an opportunity to take collaboration to a new level; one which they would be unlikely to experience as high school students in the "closed" environment of their own schools.

Plans are underway to continue and to expand the program in the 1992-1993 school year; we will be meeting later this month to finalize events. In response to the suggestions of the student participants, we hope to include an overnight trip and more social activities. If last year was any indication, we look forward to a fruitful experience.

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